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Marilyn Holly
University of Florida

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Book Review

Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity, Jürgen Habermas. Edited with an introduction by Eduardo Mendieta. The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2002. 176 pages, annotated and including index. ISBN: 0-262-08312-4 (hardcover, \$45.00) and 0-262-58216-3 (paperback, \$19.95).

Eduardo Mendieta, a specialist among other things in global and discourse ethics and critical theory including that of Habermas, is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the Stony Brook Department of Philosophy. He has ably edited and introduced this volume of seven Habermas essays dating from 1982 through 1997, together with an eighth chapter consisting of Mendieta's 2002 interview with Habermas, produced especially for this volume. This collection will give those interested in seeing an updating of Jürgen Habermas's thought on religion since his 1981 publication in German of *The Theory of Communicative Action* an opportunity to see some of his further views on the relations of religion to philosophical reason and to the modern period. Habermas, who is now Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at the University of Frankfurt, and is one of the more important philosophy/sociology scholars of our time, is sometimes thought of as a neo-Enlightenment thinker and a neo-Kantian. His philosophy and social theory has not caught on in the United States as much as it has in Europe, but his thinking about the relations between religion, philosophy, and modernity can speak meaningfully to people in this country today. The present volume of essays will perhaps be rather too specialized and particularized in its responses to specific philosophers and theologians for the general philosophical reader, but one need not be a Habermas specialist to appreciate some of the major issues Habermas addresses. My review will pick out these issues as its focus, leaving Mendieta's enthusiastic introduction to the book to present some of the more detailed commentary on the chapters one by one.

The contents of the volume are as follows (the dates indicated refer to the original publication dates in German, except for Chapter 8). There is a 36-page Introduction by Mendieta; Chapter 1, "The German Idealism of the Jewish Philosophers," which appeared in German in 1982; Chapter 2, "On the Difficulty of Saying No," 1984; Chapter 3, "Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in the World," 1991; Chapter 4, "To Seek to Salvage an Unconditional Meaning Without God is a Futile Undertaking," 1991, Chapter 5, "Communicative Freedom and Negative Theology," 1997; Chapter 6, "Israel or Athens: Where does Anamnestic Reason Belong?" 1997; Chapter 7, "Tracing the Other of History, Gershom Scholem's *Sabbati Levi*," 1997; and Chapter 8, "A Conversation About God and the World," an interview produced for this volume in 2002.

Rather than giving a brief discussion of each of the chapters in the present volume, I find it more meaningful to thematize what emerge for me as the most salient issues in the chapters. This will permit a more coherent presentation than would be possible in reviewing each chapter separately, since there is a certain amount of redundancy and overlap in the separate articles. The topics I

discuss below are not exhaustive of all that is in these chapters. Also included in the volume is a limited discussion of Jewish mysticism, a limited discussion of the differences between the first and second generations of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, and, *passim*, numerous shorter and longer references to particular theologians and philosophers who have written on topics of interest to Habermas.

I think that for readers of Habermas's two volume *The Theory of Communicative Action* of 1981 (published in English in 1984), Chapter 3 of the present volume of essays will be of particular interest in its updating and augmentation of Habermas's views on the role of religion in society and human life, and the relation of religion to rationality. Although Habermas does not withdraw his earlier views his augmentation of them here presents a significant shift of focus. In *The Theory of Communicative Action* he had focused on a functional role for religion in society, seeing it as a way that governments had, earlier on, of legitimating their power. He argued that the collapse of the authority of religious world views in modernity had left only (at best) consensus about secular principles of universalistic ethics of responsibility. He had also earlier argued that religious world views, largely unvalidated but also largely unquestioned by earlier humans, gave way to metaphysical world views as human history progressed, and out of this emerged factual/scientific, moral/legal, and expressive discourse, each with its own modes of validation mediated by the possibility of presenting relevant, adequate, and verifiable reasons for the content of communications, thus bringing about the possibility of rational consensus. In modernity philosophy gave up the goal of ascertaining verifiable truth from the perspective of some religious or metaphysical "transcendence from without," that is, from a God's eye view. But Habermas, who continues today to be influenced by the writings of the American pragmatist philosopher C.S. Peirce, continues to argue that philosophy can utilize a kind of "transcendence from within," as a substitute for a God's eye view that had once buttressed assertions of purported absolute truth. Peirce argued that over time after much discussion and testing there will or can be a convergence in human thinking about which propositions are to be accepted as true. This is not so much a prediction as a regulative ideal in human communication and the search for truth. It is the ideal of moving toward the only kind of certitude humans can attain, without a guarantor of certainty, i.e., without reference to a God's perspective. It is a transcendence from within, as Habermas puts it.

Philosophy in modernity translates religious propositions into non-religious propositions that carry relevant validity claims that can in principle be cashed in via Peircian convergence, in the long run. (Never mind how long the run.) This sort of translation does not make use of a concept of method of external-transcendence (a God's eye view), and is called by Habermas a "methodological atheism." He has long committed himself to this sort of translation or methodological atheism as one of his goals for philosophy in modernity. But, he now asks in the present volume, can philosophy do this translation without remainder? Or does religion have something more to say to the believer, something that philosophy in its modernity cannot say?

The answer that Habermas gives is a resounding, "Yes, religion does offer something more to the believer, something that philosophy cannot say." Although he does not withdraw from his earlier functionalist view of religion's role, he now asserts in a number of places in the present volume that religion's major and continuing appeal to human beings is, and has always been, its offer of theodicy. People suffer in life, often horribly. Many lives are desperate, and it has been this way throughout history. People have turned and still turn now to the theodicy that religion offers, as a

source of explanation and hope and salvation in its teachings that God finds a way to relieve the suffering of individuals and societies. It is this that religion offers that philosophy cannot offer, even on a Peircian basis, for Peircian convergence-in-principle is a transcendence from within the world and not from outside the world. There is no way that philosophy can offer verifiable validity claims for soteriological hopes. Thus philosophy does not and cannot replace religion in this respect. Habermas does not suggest to the philosophical reader that soteriological religion be either retained or jettisoned, but the implication of his more recent thinking is that it need not be jettisoned ... as long as we know we are doing religion and not philosophy.

Habermas knows that he is considered a neo-Enlightenment thinker, but he makes it clear to the reader in the present volume that both "Athens" and "Israel" have played important roles in Western thought and his own thought. He values Hellenized Christianity for what he sees as its emphasis on individualism, freedom, autonomy, and justice, which he considers to be Christianity's valuable legacy to humanity right down to and including this present period of secularized modernity. Indeed, modernity owes these ideals to Christianity. But Christianity owes it to modernity to take cultural diversity into serious account, and to apply these formal ideals worldwide without coercion. Habermas is very much aware that coercion has been used all too often in world history as a tool of colonization-cum-conversion, and his theory of communicative action is committed to discursive persuasion by reasoned argument rather than by coercion.

As for the role of "Israel" in Western thought and in Habermas's own thought, it is to be found in the emphasis that he places in the importance of anamnestic reason in Jewish philosophy. This has entered strongly into the Judeo-Christian theodicy, that theodicy that cannot be translated without remainder into secularized propositions. Habermas implicitly makes a distinction between "reportage," which he says (Chapter 1) is not philosophy, and anamnestic reason, i.e., reason that considers the changes and processes of human history and the etiologies that can be traced historically. (This is in turn distinguished from argumentative and impersonal reason.) Both argumentative and anamnestic reason enter significantly into Habermas's own formal pragmatism in his theory of communicative action, and anamnesis, as well as the non-Hellenistic emphasis on the human need for theodicy (a need unassuageable by philosophy) can be traced to the influence of Jewish thought. However, Habermas rejects as specious any definitive separation between German idealism and Jewish philosophy, seeing instead a mutual influence.

This volume is not without a rather constant pitch for Habermas's own theory of communicative action, which is brought in frequently and without much explanation. The reader may find that a rather extensive and quite interesting and important discussion and critique in Chapter 5 of Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death* does not make too much sense without it, or without having read Kierkegaard. But the critique is so interesting that I want to mention it explicitly. Here, Habermas criticizes Kierkegaard's analysis of despair for proceeding not on a basis of a dialogue between a despairing human and other humans about a shared material world and a shared social world, but on the basis of a failure on the part of the despairing human to relate the self appropriately to its (purported) founder, God. Habermas's criticism of Kierkegaard along the way for depicting a view of the sickness of the self without a verifiable view of the health of the self is interesting too, but Kierkegaard's ignoring of the shared material and social worlds in his analysis of the sickness of the self is more cogently argued, I think. Habermas is surely right in this critique, from a modernist perspective. Kierkegaard attended the University of Berlin while Engels was also

studying there, though the two didn't meet. Kierkegaard was far removed, too far, from the world of Engels and Marx for whom an analysis of the sickness of the self without reference to the shared material and social worlds would have been unthinkable. However, Kierkegaard, even had he granted the importance of these worlds, would not have found in them any satisfaction for his quest for an absolute validation of the worth of the self. For Habermas, the latter goal would be unattainable in philosophy. If Kierkegaard's view is to stand, it must for modernity stand outside of philosophy, in the area of religion. But for Kierkegaard, ontology was still a possibility for philosophy even though he believed that faith can and must make leaps that reason cannot make. I consider this material on Kierkegaard sufficiently valuable to want to call particular attention to it here. Habermas's attitude toward Kierkegaard is very respectful, as a key figure in Western thought.

All in all, Habermas's *Religion and Rationality* will be of interest to his readers and to those desirous of exploring the differences between religion and philosophy especially in modernity. It is not an easy book to read, and would go best for those with some previous acquaintance with this author. There is a rather poignant, albeit brief, autobiographical reference in Chapter 1, where Habermas mentions his dismay in listening on the German radio to the Nuremberg trials when he was 15-16 years old. He was dismayed not only by the inhumanity and the horror of the content of the trials, but also by the focusing of the German audience almost exclusively on procedural matters in listening to the trials. Habermas permits himself a brief, rare bit of emotional expression here behind his usually cool, disciplined, and rational façade. He himself would call this reportage. Whatever one calls it, it is moving to see it.

Marilyn Holly
University of Florida